

December 11, 2022
"Managing Expectations"
Isaiah 35:1-10 / Matthew 11:2-10
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

We're all familiar, I trust, with the tendency to lower our expectations in order to avoid disappointment.

Better to be pleasantly surprised when LOW expectations are met or exceeded, the argument goes, than repeatedly disappointed when HIGH expectations are not.

I've shared before from Ross Gay's *Book of Delights*, which again, I highly recommend. It's a collection of essays, and this time I'm share a brief story from one of those essays. For context, just know that Ross Gay is a Black man – in fact, much of his writing in this book centers his experience of observing and claiming joy amidst the complexities of living in America as a Black man.

Picture him working on his laptop while sitting in a coffee shop, in a small Midwestern town where he'd just given a poetry reading at the local college. He writes,

And while I was working, headphones on, swaying to the new De La Soul record (delight, which deserves its own entry), I noticed a white girl—she looked fifteen, but could've been, I suppose, a college student—standing next to me with her hand raised. I looked up, confused, pulled my headphones back, and she said, like a coach or something, "Working on your paper?! Good job to you! High five!" And you better believe I high-fived that child in her preripped Def Leppard shirt and her itty-bitty Doc Martens. For I love, I delight in, unequivocally pleasant public physical interactions with strangers. What constitutes pleasant, it's no secret, is informed by my large-ish, male, and cisgender body, a body that is also large-ish, male, cisgender, and not white. In other words, the pleasant, the delightful, are not universal. We all should understand this by now.

It is indeed a pleasure, a delight, a gift when our low expectations are met or exceeded. When we are surprised, caught off guard. But as Gay's story also makes clear, lowering our expectations is an understandable, and even necessary, survival instinct – one borne of too many experiences of failure and disappointment. Even hurt and harm.

We've already lit Advent candles representing hope and peace, and this morning we added the candle of joy. Next week, it's love.

Hope, of course, is expectation's synonym. So is trust. So is possibility. So is promise. These are Advent words. Hope, if you will, is trusting the POSSIBILITY that light will come in the darkness – that is, where it seems impossible, where we are least likely to expect it; and trusting the PROMISE that the darkness will not overcome it.

As faith unlocks the door, hope opens it to the possibility and promise of peace and joy and love.

When we find ourselves in darkness, or find the world in darkness, repeatedly, continually, it is a very human tendency to lower our expectations that light, peace, joy, love, will find their way in.

Consciously or not, we allow hope to fade. We give up. We let the door close, or we just close it ourselves. We may or may not keep ourselves open to the possibility of being pleasantly surprised. And while we may believe that we are protecting ourselves from inevitable disappointment, ultimately, effectively, we are just normalizing disappointment. Disappointment is the expectation.

Surprise or light, if you will, becomes less and less likely the less we invest in it ourselves.

I know this to be true in relationships. Maybe you do, too? I have had my share of relationships, personal and professional, where I've lowered my expectations of someone else – consciously or not, for one reason or another. Again, better to be pleasantly surprised than perpetually disappointed. Or hurt.

And so I act accordingly. I may distance myself. I may pull back from asking as much, or anything, of someone because I don't think they're capable. I don't think they'll deliver. Why bother? What's the point? I know what's gonna happen.

Or I may hesitate to speak my truth, to risk vulnerability, conflict, with someone else because, say, I'm too angry. Or too afraid. Or I convince myself that they can't handle it. Or maybe that they aren't self-aware enough, or whatever, to hear it. To receive it. Things won't go the way I want.

I sell them short. I make my prediction of the future, but in so doing, end up fulfilling my own prophesy. I guarantee the outcome.

There are countless ways we, people, lower our expectations; all of us, in relationships and otherwise. And please understand that I'm not suggesting here that there's never a need, in our day-to-day lives, to manage expectations of each other and ourselves.

Sometimes we do get burned and need to step back. Sometimes survival is all we can manage. We have a right, and a need, to pick our battles.

But the call and pull of Advent, I believe, is to err on the side of risking disappointment by raising our expectations – living into the promise and possibility of those expectations in our lives and in the world around us. And so raising the likelihood that those expectations will be met, and even exceeded.

That makes me think of Francis. As was shared during his memorial service, Francis worked for 25 years at The Gables, the bed-and-breakfast a few blocks from here. Part of what he did there was pick up trash all around the property – not just right in front, but in the surrounding blocks. Keeping the neighborhood clean was important to Francis.

But you can imagine that vision, that commitment, running up against the reality that as quickly as he would pick up trash one day, he would find more trash the next day, or the next week. No one would have blamed him if he had lowered his expectations, if he gave up and conceded to that frustrating reality. But that's not what he did. He continued, day after day, to live into raised expectations of what the neighborhood could and should look like. He believed everyone deserved to live in a clean neighborhood.

That's what hope is. That's what hope does. That's why hope is so important for us and for the world. We inspire hope by doing hopeful things.

In Jane Austen's classic novel, *Sense and Sensibility* – and let me say here that you will never again here me reference Jane Austen; I am not a fan! Anyway, one of the three sisters in the novel, Elinor, at one point observes that for her sister and mother, "To wish

was to hope, and to hope was to expect." To wish was to hope, and to hope was to expect.

And in case you're now impressed with my extensive literary knowledge, as you may have been with my extensive historical knowledge last week, I looked this up, too. Just sayin!

To wish was to hope, and to hope was to expect.

Today's scripture texts, as Amy just read for us, are about hope and expectations. About managing, re-orienting, raising expectations.

The gospel text from Matthew keeps the focus on John the Baptist, one of our J's from last week's sermon. This time he's in prison. No need to get in to why, only to note that he's apparently starting to wonder himself whether Jesus is the one John believes him to be, "the one who is to come." The one for whom John had been preparing the way.

John sends his own disciples to ask Jesus if he's the one, or if they should wait for someone else? If they should EXPECT someone else.

"Manage your expectations" is basically what Jesus says in response. Believe what you will, but make sure you're looking for and listening for this: the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the lepers cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead raised, the poor receiving good news. If you're not, you're looking for the wrong signs and listening to the wrong voices.

Expect the unexpected.

And then Jesus goes on, speaking to the crowds about their expectations of John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?" What did you EXPECT?

"A reed shaken by the wind?" Did you sell John short? Did you lower your expectations?

And "What then did you go out to see?" Again, what did you EXPECT?

"Someone dressed in soft robes?" Did you sell John short, did you lower your expectations because you assumed that he, like me, should be dressed like royalty? Could only be royalty? Did you assume that prophecy, that anything worth hearing, could only come from high places?

Manage your expectations. REORIENT your expectations. RAISE your expectations. Prophecy, GOOD NEWS, LIGHT in the midst of darkness, comes IN and FROM and TO unexpected places and people. Even the places and people you might LEAST expect. Expect the unexpected. Get used to it.

Which brings us to the text from Isaiah. Picking up where the prophet left off the last two Sundays and PEACE-filled visions of swords beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. Visions of wolves living with lambs, and calves and lions lying down together. And a little child leading the way.

Expect the unexpected.

This time we get JOY-filled visions, visions of water in dry places. In the driest places, in fact. Where you'd least expect to find water.

"The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing."

Then, echoing Jesus – or rather, Jesus echoing Isaiah: "... the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water ..."

Expect the unexpected. There is joy to be found in what we expect, no doubt, but there is even more joy to be found in what we don't.

It is easy, living in the world as it is, looking at the world as it is around us, to dismiss such visions as fantasy. As wishful thinking.

It's easy, even understandable, to lower our expectations of what is promised and what is possible. In our lives. In our relationships. And certainly in the world around us, broken as it is.

It's easy to sit back and wait for what we deem increasingly UNLIKELY, or even distance ourselves from it, maybe, MAYBE, holding on to the off-chance that we might be pleasantly surprised.

But consider what it would be like, what it would look like, what it would feel like, to raise our expectations instead. To step up and move toward the unlikely, to engage it rather than dismiss it. Risking disappointment, to be sure, but leaning into hope, reigniting the divine imagination, and so opening the door to both the promise and possibility of PEACE that turns swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

To JOY that breaks forth like water in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

To LOVE that casts out fear and makes the blind to see and the lame to walk and the deaf to hear and the dead to live again. To love that releases the captives and feeds the hungry. Love that is good news for the poor and most vulnerable among us.

Love, as Paul puts it, that “never ends.”

This, friends, is the call and pull of Advent. Advent waiting is active, expectant waiting. It's about living and loving NOT into the world as it is, or to the world our lowered, REALISTIC expectations suggest is actually possible. But with hope and RAISED expectations, living and loving our way into the world we actually WANT, as Rabbi Michal Lerner often says, the world we trust that God intends and desires for all of us.

Living and loving not into this present darkness, but into the perpetual possibility of light – trusting the divine promise that the darkness will never overcome it.

To wish is to hope, and to hope is to expect. Expect the unexpected.

May it be so.